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The Traitor and the Hedonist:

The mythology of motherhood in two New Zealand child abuse cases

Abstract

Two recent child abuse cases in New Zealand flooded the local media spotlight and captured the public's attention. In both cases, the mothers were not charged with murdering their children. Yet, both mothers received extensive scrutiny in media coverage. This qualitative analysis found two central narratives in media content: that of the traitor and of the hedonist. In drawing upon such archetypal mythologies surrounding motherhood, the media constructed these women as simplistic deviants who did not possess the qualities of a mother. These framing techniques served to divert scrutiny away from civil society and exonerated social institutions of any potential wrongdoing while also reaffirming a persistent mythology that remains damaging to women.

Keywords: Framing, motherhood, myths, mainstream news, New Zealand

On June 18, 2006, Chris and Cru Kahui, three-month-old twins, died from severe head injuries as the result of blunt force trauma. The children showed evidence of historic rib fractures in addition to their massive neurological failure (Eames, 2007a). The father of the twins, Chris Kahui was charged with their death, but was subsequently found not guilty due to a lack of evidence. Fifteen months after the Kahui twins' deaths, Nia Glassie, a three-year old toddler also died. Allegations of her abuse included 'reports of being put in a tumble drier' and being hung from a washing line as well as being forced to stay on the roof of her home (*Nia Glassie murder charges laid*, 2007). Her stepfather, Wiremu Curtis, 17, and his brother, Michael Curtis, 21, were both convicted of murder for her death and both received life sentences with a minimum 17-year non-parole period. Another three people were charged with assaulting Nia: the father of the two brothers charged with her murder, William Curtis, 47, who later received a four-year sentence on eight assault charges; and Michael Curtis' girlfriend, Oriwa Kemp, 17, and her cousin, Michael Pearson, 19, who each received a three year sentence for the wilful ill-treatment and assault of the child. Nia's mother, Lisa Kuka, was found guilty on two manslaughter charges relating to a lack of protection and failure to seek medical help for her injured daughter.

All of the children murdered were Maori, the indigenous population in New Zealand. Incidence of Maori child abuse is at least double the white population in New Zealand, with some agencies claiming that it is actually five times higher (*Child abuse claims raise queries about Maori culture*, 2007). The popular 1994 fictional film, *Once Were Warriors*, helped to put Maori child abuse to the fore and these recent cases have predictably increased media attention to the issue of child abuse within Maori communities. However, it was the time and attention spent on the mothers in these cases that far surpassed any amount of coverage devoted to Maoridom or to the actual perpetrators of these horrific crimes.

Larger statistical trends suggest father figures are far more likely to be the perpetrator of child murders (U.S. Department of Justice, 2005), as was found in both these cases. Yet, there was extensive discussion about the actions of both mothers, even though neither mother was charged with murdering their children. A preliminary examination of the Kahui and Glassie murder coverage completed for this study found that the mothers, Macsyne King and Lisa Kuka,

were the most frequently mentioned people in content (31 percent) outside of the victims. This paper aims to closely examine this coverage to better understand the myths surrounding motherhood and how these narratives work to absolve civil society in New Zealand while placing blame squarely upon mothers.

It should be noted that much of the reason these two women received such a high amount of scrutiny could likely be placed on their status as minorities within mainstream, Pakeha (New Zealanders from non-Maori bloodlines), culture. Gender, race and class are inextricably linked within both a national and international context. The fact that these two women are of Maori descent places them within a unique cultural and historical moment specific to New Zealand. Yet, much like Bourgois' (1995) unique examination of the Puerto Rican men and women of El Barrio, this work aims to explore the larger hegemonic expectations that mainstream society place upon specific roles – in this case motherhood. These expectations certainly differ in degree across race and class, but this article argues that the strength of the maternal archetype pervades throughout the identity of women as a collective.

The modern mother can be viewed through a multifaceted chimera of overlapping, and, at times, conflicting meanings. Mothers are heralded as the saviours of our society while also bearing the brunt of responsibility for so many of our social ills. This research argues that these modern narratives of motherhood work to obfuscate the underlying causes of social problems while also elevating the maternal role of caregiver to unreachable heights. Problems in society and in individuals can immediately be traced back to an unloving maternal presence, rather than to any number of other possible causes. By elevating the status of motherhood as the ultimate source of what is right and good in the world, society is exonerated from any real responsibility. Motherhood is constructed through media narratives in such a way to potentially prohibit in-depth investigation into the causes and potential remedies of child abuse.

Motherhood

Many scholars have examined the role of the media in constructing femininity (Dines & Humez, 1995; Kitch, 1997; van Zoonen, 1994) and motherhood (Barnett, 2005). Motherhood has been said to be the ultimate achievement for women (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Nicolson,

2001). These constructions of motherhood are 'presumed to be a primary identity for most adult women' (Arendell, 2000: 1192). Simone de Beauvoir (1952) famously wrote that such mythologies can be traced back to our collective image of Jesus Christ's mother, the virginesque and poised Mary. Implicit in such depictions is that childlessness can only be equated to heartbreak (Hewlett, 2002). The result of such a simplistic view of motherhood is that contemporary society still expects women to develop 'the traditionally female crafts of emotional support, nurturance, empathy, and concrete reasoning' (Dow, 1995). This expectation is a key component in the relationship between 'gender roles, social roles, and political power' (Foster, 2005: 57). This mythology of motherhood most certainly implicates how mothers should behave toward their children. As Barnett (2006) states, 'mothers are supposed to be guided by 'natural' feminine instincts that confer an angelic temperament and make them instantly loving toward their infants, clairvoyant about their children's needs, and willing to place their own desires second to those of their families' (411-2).

Feminist scholars have challenged these mythologies, arguing that motherhood can not fall under one definition (Thompson, 2002); that these idealized narratives have never even resembled the realities of actual mothers (Douglas & Michaels, 2004); and that the role of motherhood itself is not appealing for many women (Chase, 2001). These scholars understood that cultural discourses and individual existence are one and the same. More simply stated, that the personal is political. In that vein, some scholars have argued that motherhood is a form of oppression toward women (Firestone, 1970). Feminist scholars have also pointed out that mothers often remain the objects, and not the subjects, of narratives that are purported to depict their personal experiences (Cixous, 1981).

In reporting about mothers, journalists have been found to continue their reliance on familiar myths surrounding the good mother as nurturing and the bad mother as destroying (Lule, 2001). Other work has found that the media construct simplistic, historical myths around mothers who are violent (Barnett, 2006). However, no work could be found that examines how women, and particularly mothers, are represented in media coverage about violence where the women are not the perpetrators or the victims. This omission in the literature is an important area of scrutiny to better understand the pervasiveness of the myths surrounding motherhood.

Constructing Meaning through the News

Any examination of media content cannot divorce the narratives themselves from the cultural scripts from which they are drawn. Meaning, the direction of influence in this complex process remains perpetually unclear. Journalists depend upon these shared cultural narratives to build stories (Bird & Dardenne, 1997; Hanson, 2001; Kitch, 2002). The reliance on these cultural scripts, or myths, helps readers disentangle potentially complicated stories (Kitch, 2002) and also provides the reader with a sense of comfort based on familiar tales (Bird & Dardenne, 1997). Because of this continuous and interchanging process, this study makes no claims as to whether the media narratives found are based upon mythologies initially created in society or whether they were first found in media.

Regardless of the explicit directional relationship, Scheufele (1999) points out that the present stage of media research, characterized by 'social constructivism,' is defined by both strong and limited effects. Mass media construct powerful images of reality for the public, who then contextualise these narratives against their own pre-existing schemas. This results in a process whereby audiences depend on 'a version of reality built from personal experience, interaction with peers, and interpreted selections from the mass media' (Neuman, Just & Crigler, 1992). These versions of reality or meaningful contexts (Entman, 1993) serve to construct 'the culture of an issue' (Gamson & Lasch, 1983: 397).

Drawing upon narrative analysis is central to understanding the myths surrounding motherhood. As Richardson has said, 'narrative is the best way to understand the human experience because it is the way humans understand their own lives' (Richardson, 1990: 133). Narratives help us to 'construct the irrational and rational, the illogical as sensible, and the tumultuous as safe. [Narratives] provide a way for us to establish cause and effect and explain to ourselves and others the reasons why events transpired as they did' (Barnett, 2005: 13). Narrative theory 'recognizes that stories have the power to link the personal and the cultural: that within the mundane, minute details of a specific event, relationship, or interaction, the reader/researcher can identify cultural beliefs, practices, and trends' (Foster, 2005: 58). Through

such a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) it is possible to better understand the myths behind modern motherhood.

Repeated cultural stories enter into 'that precise field of the distribution of the dominant ways in which a society makes sense of what is going on around it or what is happening to it' (Hall, 1984: 7-8). Myth is often relied upon in journalism as it can lay bare the notions of what society celebrates and detests (Koch, 1990). Myths transcend time and even place to take on characteristics of the 'truth' (Fisher, 1985), which provide journalists with implicit assumptions from which to build a news story. These assumptive myths contain any information that we need to evaluate the actions of others and even of ourselves (Carter, 1996). The media constantly reproduce 'collective memories, desires, hopes and fears,' performing 'a similar function as myths in earlier centuries' (van Zoonen, 1994: 37). It is this consistency in reporting through mythological formulas that serves as a source of comfort for both the journalist and the reader (Hanson, 2001).

Research Questions

This research attempts to gain insight into how the motherhood is represented in stories about the murder of a child where the mother is not the perpetrator or the victim of the crime. This approach was taken after a cursory examination of media coverage revealed an extraordinary amount of time attention focused on mothers who were never charged with murdering their children. Based on the foregoing and drawing from the related work of Barnett (2005; 2006), the following research questions will be explored:

RQ1: What collective narratives did news stories tell about the mothers of these murdered children?

RQ2: How did collective narratives in the media refute or support cultural myths about motherhood?

Methodology

As was stated earlier, a previous, preliminary examination by this author examined the Kahui and Glassie murder coverage and found that the mothers were the most frequently mentioned people in content (31 percent) outside of the victims. Only 22 percent of named

individuals were the alleged perpetrators. This discovery became the foundation for this focused qualitative narrative analysis, which aimed to examine the how these mothers were represented in New Zealand newspaper coverage. The qualitative narrative analysis undertaken for this study draws from previous characterisations found in media content about mothers who killed their own children (Barnett, 2006). A very loose conceptual matrix was developed based on the rhetorical framework of Foss (1989) and allowed for an organic exploration of narrative through events, characters, setting, narrators, temporal and causal relationships, and settings (Barnett, 2006). In line with the previous work of Gamson (1992), this deductive approach first begins with a loose, preconceived idea of the narrative elements that may exist in content and then slowly proceeds in an attempt to reveal narratives utilized that may not have been considered. These studies can be difficult to replicate and are quite labour intensive (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). However, they also allow for a deeper level of analysis and understanding.

The *New Zealand Herald* was the newspaper examined for this study. *The New Zealand Herald*, is read by an average of 530,000 people on a typical day (*Herald Readership*, 2005). It is, by far, the most popular newspaper in New Zealand, with more than double the readership of any other daily newspaper in the country (*The Print Edition*, 2007). Given that just over four million people live in New Zealand (*Rank order - population*, 2005), *The New Zealand Herald* readership constitutes a substantial portion of the population.

A Factiva database search resulted in 42 articles using the search term 'Macsyne King,' the mother of the Kahui twins, as well as the combined search of 'mother' and 'Kahui twins.' After editorials and articles that were not directly dealing with the Kahui case were removed, there were 19 articles to examine. A similar Factiva search resulted in 35 articles using the search term 'Lisa Kuka,' the mother of Nia Glassie, and the combined search of 'mother' and 'Nia Glassie.' After non-pertinent articles were removed, there were 15 articles to examine. There were 34 total articles to qualitatively analyse between the Kahui and Glassie cases.

Results

The Traitor

The traitor is a familiar narrative in journalism (Lule, 2001). Perhaps derived from the Biblical tale of Judas Iscariot, the evil betrayal of innocence is commonly found in news content. A traitor is defined as a person who betrays another, a cause, or any trust through deception. Macsyne King and Lisa Kuka easily fit within this narrative as deceptive traitors to motherhood itself.

Their traitorous acts of these mothers were that of simply not 'being there.' This essential responsibility is sacrosanct to the all-encompassing mythology of motherhood. The long-suffering mother who always has a shoulder to cry on; an ear to listen; a helpful story to share. The archetypal mother needs only to be present to shield any harm that may come toward her child. Her presence as a mother is enough. This myth helps to reassure mothers that they can in fact protect their children in a world that seems increasingly more dangerous. However, a repercussion to accepting this myth is that if a mother is not present when her child is hurt, then she has committed a traitorous act against her most basic of roles as a mother. She may not cause any physical harm to her child but if she was not present when such a crime occurred, she must shoulder the blame as a refutation of her most basic of responsibilities.

Such narratives take more prominence when male voices are speaking. William 'Banjo' Kahui, the grandfather of the Kahui twins and the father of Chris Kahui, who has been accused of the children's murder, is summarized as being 'angry that Ms. King, the primary caregiver, was out when Cru took ill' (Eames, 2007c). By inserting the clause, 'the primary caregiver,' the reporter implicitly agrees with Banjo Kahui that in this role as the primary caregiver, she *should* have been present. If the mother had a shared role of caregiver to these children then her absence may not have been questioned to the same degree. Her immediate assumed placement as primary caregiver is central to the myth of motherhood and is certainly questionable in Macsyne King's case. Her partner, Chris Kahui, was unemployed at the time and they had newborn twins who had just come home from the hospital after being born prematurely. His role as a caregiver was never mentioned in any of the content.

The incredulous response to the mother's absence continues throughout coverage. The grandfather is quoted to repeatedly question the whereabouts of King on the night that one of the twins stopped breathing - 'how come Macsyne is not here?' (Eames, 2007c) Another article that focused on the grandfather's testimony states that 'Mr. Kahui could not find Ms. King. She came home the next morning' (McNaughton & Ihaka, 2006). It is only until much later in the article that the text suggests that she 'needed a break,' which is why she was not at home that evening and was staying with her sister. However, no reporter ever questions or explains why Macsyne may have needed such a break even though the demands on her would have presumably been high with two newborn twins in the home. The grandfather said earlier that the mother was 'always around,' alluding to the fact that her departure from the home was a rare occurrence. Her departure on this particular evening implicates the mother as the principal reason that harm befell her children.

Her absence on that evening is noted in another story (Eames, 2007b), where the text reads that the father 'is accused of murdering them while their mother, Macsyne King, was away from the couple's Mangere home.' While this story does not question the whereabouts of Macsyne King directly, it still does place a cause and effect relationship between the murder of the children and the departure of Macsyne King away from the home. Implicit in these statements is the assumption that the mother's place is in the home and if the mother had been home her children would still be alive. Perhaps in one of the most clearest delineations between the expected role of a mother and expectations placed upon everybody else, the grandfather is quoted as saying, 'I never looked after the young ones...she was the mother' (McNaughton & Ihaka, 2006). Macsyne King has a singular responsibility to these children, apart from the 12 other adults living in the home, and her departure that evening was a traitorous act against motherhood.

Lisa Kuka, the mother of Nia Glassie, also is implicitly implicated in the death of her daughter because of her departure from her role as a mother and not because of any actions she had taken to harm the child. Articles repeatedly state that her three daughters were 'under the care of their mother'. Her decision to not be home when the abuse was inflicted on her daughter is her principle crime. In one article, it states that Kuka, 34, had left Nia in the care of the

accused, while she was at work at a kiwifruit factory in Te Puke' ('Kuka's 'no show' for kids,' 2007). An equally factual headline could read: 'Forced to return to work so that her family had food on the table, Kuka left Nia in the care of the accused.' Both of these statements involve Kuka leaving her child to go to work but they have drastically different emotive results. As in the case in every story, there are several competing frames available to the reporter from which to choose from.

This implicit and explicit placement of blame upon the parent who has not been charged with any crime is wholly dependent upon the myth of motherhood as the sole source of nurturance. Given the discursive framing, the reader is to surmise that Kuka is at fault because she abdicated her essential role as a mother being the sole source of love and care. The negation of this 'idealized figure of the Good Mother' (Ruddick, 1995: 31), reaffirms the myth of all complete and all loving maternal presence. This myth 'permits the illusion of the good mother to continue and reinforces the cultural stereotype of women as all-loving' (Barnett, 2005: 19). In confirming this myth, society is left in the comfortable position of distance away from such an obvious aberration.

The Hedonist

The second narrative found in content was that of the hedonist. These mothers were shown to have no interest in their children and cared only of their own wellbeing. Meyers et. al. characterized this narrative as 'bad mothers' and defined them as 'cold, callous, evil mothers who have often been neglectful of their children or their domestic responsibilities' (Meyers et al., 2001). A 26 June article (Eames, 2006c) stated that social workers had early on 'raised concerns about an apparent lack of interest in the twins' alluding to possible detachment that would later be confirmed.

In a damning article that framed King as particularly callous, it was reported that the mother went back to sleep after one of the twins stopped breathing. In the text, her sister, Emily King, was said to have told the court that she tried to rouse Macsyne, who was staying at her home. Macsyne King allegedly responded 'yep, oh yep,' and then went back to sleep. Her sister went on to say that Macsyne told her the following morning that she would 'check it out' when she got home later in the day (Eames, 2007a). Toward the end of the piece, it is reported that

Macsyne was drinking heavily the night before. The reporter never makes the connection between these two pieces of information, but certainly the alcohol could have impaired King's response to her sister. This is not introduced here as an excuse for Macsyne King's behaviour but to illustrate the lack of contextual explanation in the case of these mothers. News content never attempted to explore any possible reasons behind her actions or explicate contextual factors surrounding the mothers' actions.

Most content described Macsyne King as a 'jealous' woman who drank, smoked marijuana and cigarettes, partied at all hours and fought with her friends and family. A notable exception was a statement that read, 'despite the parties, she expressed breast milk for the babies – at least intermittently' (du Chateau & Cleave, 2006). Consider if this was written as the following: 'despite the parties, Macsyne King was dedicated to expressing milk intermittently for her children.' Written in this manner, a different characterisation is cast upon King. Here, she is a dedicated mother with a drinking problem – something that many other women could relate to. Written as it was though, she is portrayed as a woman who simply does not care for her children. This is confirmed later on in the article where Mr. Tamihere, a Former Member of Parliament, is quoted as saying, 'the net result of that is that you don't care about your conduct, you don't care about its ramifications, about its impact. You just care about the next 14 days till you get your bene (benefit cheque)' (du Chateau & Cleave, 2006).

The half-sisters of Macsyne King, were summarized as saying that Macsyne King never wanted to be a mother. 'It's obvious, isn't it?' Denise King said. 'She is into parties and groups of people' (Eames, 2006b). Here, the categories are mutually exclusive. Once a woman accepts her role as a mother, her entire life is to be given to her children and any interest in maintaining adult relationships - particularly if that involves congenial gatherings with many friends - is simply not how a mother behaves. The polarizing dichotomy is clear: a dutiful, homebound mother in opposition to the extroverted, social drinker who fraternizes at parties.

Descriptions of the Kahui home further suggest an atmosphere of detached engagement with the children. The Kahui home is described as a place in which 'two small babies lived' alongside 12 others in a 'cramped three-bedroomed house, drinking, smoking dope and cigarettes, partying, fighting – and sleeping in rotating shifts' (du Chateau & Cleave, 2006). It is

assumed from this sentence that the family slept in rotating shifts to somehow allow for more space to drink and do drugs. It is never questioned that perhaps the reason that the family sleeps in shifts is due to the physical limitations of 14 impoverished people sharing limited sleeping space. The choice to sleep in rotating shifts may indeed be to spread out the parties, but no accompanying evidence supports this claim.

This dysfunctional home is where 'only one person has a job, as a cleaner.' (du Chateau & Cleave, 2006). Here, the choice to state that *only* (italics added) one person has a job and even that is 'as a cleaner' demonstrates how social forces engage the text (Hodge & Kress, 1993). Within any news text, there are limitless linguistic options available for description. Yet, some are inevitably chosen more than others. These discursive approaches are used, presumably, for a news outlet to relate better to their audience (Reah, 2002). If that is the case in this example, then the linguistic choices are purposive and telling. As the text is presented here, holding a job outside of the home, rather than working within the household would presumably hold more status to the *New Zealand Herald* reader and places Macsyne King in a specific socio-economic strata that defines her and her family. Such consistent patterns 'suggest preoccupations within the particular discursive context, and which therefore add up to a representation of the world for a culture or for a group which holds status within a culture' (Matheson, 2005: 22).

Although never speaking of a history of partners, a feature writer described how Macsyne King's 'four older children live with another former partner' (du Chateau & Cleave, 2006). In this sentence, the use of 'another' implies that there are many former partners, perhaps with even more of King's children. While this may be the case, there is no evidence in the text to support that claim. Thus, this frame remains unchallenged and King is portrayed as a woman with a history of caring more for various partners than with any continuity in parenting for her children. This hedonistic trait separates King from 'real' mothers and explains her aberrant behaviour.

Lisa Kuka, the mother of Nia Glassie, is also depicted as incapable of caring for her children. One story detailed that she 'repeatedly said she was unaware her daughter was being abused. Similar questions as to previous knowledge of abuse were not put forward to the father

in this case. The onus is clearly on the mother here to explain how she lapsed in her maternal responsibilities while the father is assumed to carry no nurturing requirements.

The only quote attributed to Lisa Kuka is in the form of a text message to the New Zealand Herald that reads 'People out thea dat know me know dat I love and care 4 my babi wif al my heart. Im strong 4 my gurl' ('Nia's sibling also injured,' 2007). This quote is preceded by a sentence reading, 'Kuka also did not want to discuss her previous dealings with CYF (Child Youth and Family) or why she told hospital staff Nia's injuries were a result of the child falling from her partner's shoulders.' In following up the preceding sentence immediately with Kuka's text message, the sentiments that she clearly was trying to portray are negated. The love for her daughter is as suspect as her statements to hospital staff. The narrative of a deceiving, hedonistic, traitorous woman is solidified.

The hedonist, Lisa Kuka, is repeatedly shown to abdicate her maternal responsibilities whereas the father of these children is never held to the same standard. For example, after Nia's murder, Lisa Kuka and Glassie Glassie Jr., Nia's father, were both denied custody of Jessie, 10, and Esther, 8, their two other children who witnessed the alleged abuse of Nia. The two sisters were said to have been 'deserted by their mother – and their father has also returned home to Australia' ('Kuka's 'no show' for kids,' 2007). The term 'deserted' is used to apply only to Lisa Kuka, while the father, who behaved in the exact same manner, was said to have 'returned home to Australia.' Such a clear juxtaposition demonstrates how the mother and the father are treated in strikingly different ways. That same article goes on to say 'No one knows where Lisa Kuka was or what she might have been doing that was more important, but the Herald on Sunday can confirm she was a no-show at crucial discussions to decide the fate of Jessie, 10, and Esther, 8.' The father of these two children was also not present at the meeting that resulted in both of these children being given to their paternal grandparents, Glassie and Celina Glassie. This uneven treatment of the father and mother continues throughout the article, which goes on to state, 'with this decision, Kuka now no longer has custody of any of her six children.' The father has also given up his children, but that is not mentioned in the text.

Discussion

The mythology of motherhood suggests that the callousness and deceptiveness of these mothers implicitly led to the death of these children. This, obviously, does not help to better understand why these children were killed. A society that exalts mothers to unattainable heights can only point outward with blame when those peaks are not reached and then quickly search for confirmation of these myths in other, more deserving, mothers. This practice excuses the rest of society for any responsibility and prohibits any structural understanding of the underlying causes of child abuse. The magnifying glass remains fixed on the deviations from such myths, rather than why such myths exist in the first place and what these myths may be concealing. The level of magnification likely differs according to the race and class of those deviating from such constructed, hegemonic ideals.

This analysis examined two women of Maori descent and it must be recognized that their lineage may have played a significant factor in the coverage they received. Gender does not exist in a vacuum outside of race and class. The construction of their failure as mothers may have been compounded by their failures as women within a minority culture. The mother figure within native cultures in particular, is often seen as responsible for not only providing economic support to her struggling family, but for serving as a cultural repository as well (Humphries, 1999). Media construction of the deviant mother, in this case, may also be drawing upon racist, mainstream ideologies and a hegemonic fear of the other. However, in constructing the narrative of these particular mothers, all mothers are implicated by default. Judgment may certainly be administered unevenly, but the charges against motherhood appear to apply regardless of race or class.

In this case, there were two collective narratives, that of the traitor and of the hedonist. In this circuitous cycle of condemnation, these deviations from the mythologies of motherhood explain why these women allowed such harm to come to their child and reaffirm what is right and good in motherhood itself. At no point did these newspapers place direct blame upon these women. However, these mothers contradicted broader mythologies of motherhood and were thus implicated in these crimes via their failure as mothers. In positioning these qualities as polar opposites to that of a mother, the *New Zealand Herald* implicitly supported the dominant cultural

myths about motherhood. Presenting these women as deviants who did not adhere to such cultural myths of motherhood allowed for a simplistic narration of these women as undeserving of our sympathy, or, to put another way, as not possessing the qualities of a mother. Again, the rationale for a lack of sympathy in these particular cases could likely be traced back to institutional racism, although that could not be definitively proven. However, the construction of these narratives affect how all mothers identify with themselves as maternal caregivers and how others evaluate and perceive their capabilities in that role.

Macsyne King, like so many women in news articles, was never quoted directly and Lisa Kuka was only quoted once. However, much of their evidence given to the courts and to police was available for examination and was still never drawn upon for these news stories. *The New Zealand Herald* clearly left these women to be the objects, and not the subjects, of the narratives that purported to depict their personal experiences. This has been a longstanding practice in the representation of mothers (Cixous, 1981). In this case, where society places all blame for the death of these children onto the mother, it is fitting that no explanation is asked nor required from the mother. When one presumes to know the guilt of another it is redundant to ask for confirmation.

This research found no soul-searching bewilderment that asked how and why a parent could commit such a crime, as was found in previous related research (Barnett, 2006). Blame was placed squarely on the mother's shoulders from a society that washed their hands of what was clearly not 'their' problem. Such simplicity allows journalists to avoid questioning why motherhood is so venerated in society but at the same time also so devalued in terms of social support. In drawing upon the cultural, simplistic myths of motherhood, journalists have no need to explain the behaviour of the mothers or of the family. There was no piece related to these stories that examined the resources available to parents who needed additional help. No journalist wrote an in-depth article examining the relationship between poverty and child abuse. There were no interviews with psychologists explaining the tightrope many women walk in balancing their relationship with an abusive partner and their love for their children. There were also no reports about why social agencies did not move in sooner when earlier reports of child abuse were evident, particularly in relation to Lisa Kuka. The common cultural myths worked to

segregate these mothers as traitorous hedonists who deviated from the role of an archetypal mother and did not deserve such explanation. In doing so, journalists exonerated social institutions of any potential wrongdoing while also reaffirming a persistent mythology that remains damaging to women.

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